

Writer's efforts take Bax Seat to no one

Awarded flying industry kudos

By Kathryn Koch
MPG Newspapers

Bob Whittier has an odd kind of luck. He might never have found his love of aviation if he hadn't lost his hearing when he was 7 years old. His career as a magazine and book writer might not have taken flight if he hadn't gotten tangled up in cockpit wires.

Whittier has made a career as an aviation writer, and in July was awarded the Bax Seat Trophy. The award, named after the late Gordon Baxter, a columnist for *Flying* magazine, is given to by the Experimental Aircraft Association to a writer who has broadened readers' appreciation of airplanes and flying.

Whittier's basement office at his home in Duxbury is cluttered with all kinds of reference materials on aviation and boating, his second love. From these materials, he draws ideas for his monthly column in *Experimenter* magazine.

"It keeps me out of mischief," he said.

Whittier, now 81, could hear when he was born in 1922 in Norwood. But when he was 7 years old, he came home from school with what he thought was an earache. It was actually a mastoid infection. He lived in Whitman at the time, a small town which didn't have the medical specialists he needed. Eventually he went to an ear specialist in Boston, but by that time the damage was done. Whittier can feel vibrations, but he cannot hear.

After losing a year of school, he went to the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Roxbury, where he learned lip reading. At the time, he said, there were two schools of thought on how deaf children should learn to communicate. One was learning lip reading and the other was using sign language. The problem with lip reading, Whittier said, is that only 30 percent of the English language can be lip read.

"Lip reading is better than nothing," he said.

Whittier said he was cut off from playing with the neighborhood children because of his deafness. He became a reader, and one day a family friend brought him a pile of aviation magazines.

"I found them interesting, and that led me to build model airplanes," he said. "In retrospect that was a wonderful hobby because it teaches a feel for the grain of the wood and the principals of flight."

Whittier learned even more about airplanes by visiting the



Staff photo/Kathryn Koch

At work and play — Aviation writer Bob Whittier jokingly says a cluttered office is a sign of genius.

five small airports within 10 miles of Brockton.

"Visiting all these small airports on my bicycle I learned a lot about small airplanes that lay the foundation for my writing activity," he said. "Young people who take airplanes for granted are missing out."

As a teen, Whittier joined the Boy Scouts, spending five summers at Bloody Pond in Plymouth. At first he took a lot of teasing, but as time passed the Scouts came to respect him for all the things he could do and he benefited from the experience. Group sports were out, but he enjoyed rowing and boating on the pond. Learning about boats prepared him for the many years of writing about boats that followed.

After graduating from Thayer Academy in Braintree, which could accommodate children with disabilities when public schools could not, Whittier attended college in Illinois. His goal was to become an airplane designer. In those days, however, colleges were not equipped to accommodate a deaf student and Whittier could not keep up with the class lectures. Instead, he got his airplane mechanics license, and ended up working at the kind of small airport he'd loved as a boy.

One day he was working underneath the instrument board of an airplane and became tangled in the wires. That led him to write a letter to *Air Pilots and Technicians* magazine, now

out of business.

"That night to blow off steam, I wrote a long letter to an aviation magazine that manufacturers should pay more attention to accessibility," he said.

Two weeks later he received an envelope in the mail with a check for \$50, which he spent on flying lessons. The editors had turned his letter into an article. Today he writes regularly for three or four different aviation magazines.

"That was 60 years ago, and I'm still doing it," he said.

His second career, writing about boating, started in Chatham. On one of his many flights to the Chatham airport, he became acquainted with a man who operated the airport and was flying visitors in his Piper Cubs to Nauset Beach, where they could land on the beach and fish for striped bass. Whittier wrote about it and sold the article to *Hunting and Fishing* magazine, which led to a weekly assignment for the magazine writing about airplanes and boats.

Soon he was being invited to press meetings by outboard motor companies. Whittier's experience with smaller boats didn't hold when the boating industry turned to bigger boats, however, so he went back to writing for aviation magazines.

During World War II, the focus in the aviation industry was on the war effort and military planes. After the war, the demand and interest in homemade planes grew, and so did the Experimental Airplane Association, a worldwide organization of 175,000 members. Whittier started writing for their magazine and for the past 12 years has been writing for them every month as a contributing editor of a column called *Light Plane Heritage*. From time to time, he also writes an article on boating.

Whittier's wife, Helen, used to make his calls, but the introduction of the fax machine changed that. Today he communicates by fax and e-mail with their three children and his magazine editor in Wisconsin. The couple has lived in Duxbury for 40 years.

Whittier has written 10 books and well over 2,000 articles, although he admits he has lost count of exactly how many. He's still making model airplanes and enjoys restoring his 1935 E-2 Piper Cub.

Whittier was in his element at the convention in Oshkosh, Wisconsin where he received the Bax Seat Trophy. He was surrounded by 700,000 people who love airplanes and over 20,000 airplanes on display.